

Harnessed to Hope



Northern Breed Rescue

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Help Your Dog to Develop a Gentle Mouth

Like humans, dogs are inquisitive creatures. Since they don't have hands, they use their noses and mouths to investigate new and interesting objects and smells. This is deeply instinctive behavior for all dogs, but especially for breeds such as Bassett and Blood hounds, which have been bred to use scent to track prey. Northern Breeds also have a tendency to be mouthy, or to use their mouths during play and to show affection. Some dogs will simply take a person's hand gently in their mouths as a sign of affection.

Dogs who have learned to be gentle with their mouths and who are able to mouth people and other dogs without causing pain or injury have good bite inhibition. Bite inhibition is a skill, and not all dogs have the opportunity to learn good bite inhibition skills. Bite inhibition is a dog's ability to control the force of his bite. Ideally, a puppy would learn bite inhibition from its mother and littermates through nursing and play. Puppy teeth are actually sharper and pointier than adult dog teeth, so puppies learn how to mouth gently before they develop the strong jaws of an adolescent or adult.

When puppies are taken away from their mother and littermates too early and are not given the opportunity to develop good bite inhibition in their new environments, this can result in a problem – an adolescent or adult dog that does not realize its own strength and may accidentally hurt other dogs or people. This can be easily misinterpreted as "aggression", which puts the dog at risk of being taken to a shelter and euthanized.

According to veterinarian and animal behaviorist Dr. Ian Dunbar's Sirius Puppy Training video,

"If you watch a litter of puppies playing, you will notice that they spend much of their time biting and grabbing each other with their mouths. This is normal puppy behavior. When you take a puppy from the litter and into your home, the puppy will play bite and mouth you. This is normal behavior, but needs to be modified so you and the puppy will be happy. The first thing to teach your new puppy is that human flesh is much more sensitive than other puppies and that it really hurts us when they bite. This is called bite inhibition. A puppy has very sharp teeth and a weak jaw. This means that the puppy can cause you to be uncomfortable when mouthing or puppy biting you, but can not cause severe damage. An adult dog has duller teeth and a powerful jaw. This means that an adult dog can cause significant damage when biting.

ANY DOG WILL BITE GIVEN THE RIGHT CIRCUMSTANCES! If a small child falls on your adult dog or sticks a finger in the dog's eye, you should not be surprised if the dog bites. If you do a good job teaching your puppy bite inhibition, you should get a grab and release without damage. If you don't, you may get a hard bite with significant damage."

Clearly it is important to teach your dog to have good bite inhibition. Even if you have an adolescent or adult dog that has not developed good bite inhibition, there are ways to teach the dog to inhibit the force of its bite so that it can develop a gentle mouth.

What Doesn't Work

There are some things that are commonly used to try to correct this problem that can actually make it worse, or even create new problems. Dog training philosophy has changed a lot over the past 20 years, and some methods that were encouraged 10 years ago are now known to scare

and confuse dogs instead of teach them the correct behavior. The following is a list of things not to try:

- Smack the dog on the nose (or at all)
- Yell at the dog
- Shake the dog
- Growl at the dog
- Alpha roll the dog (forcefully roll the dog on to it's back or side)
- Hit the dog under the chin
- Shoving your hand into the dog's mouth

These methods do nothing to teach the dog how to be gentle with its mouth, but they can teach a dog to be fearful of you, and may even trigger an aggressive response. Read this article called ["Recipe to Ruin a Good Dog"](#) to see how using force based training and physical punishment can cause serious behavior problems even in a young dog.

It is important to remember that this dog needs to learn a skill from you that it should have learned from its mother and siblings. Perhaps the dog was removed from the mother and siblings too early. Perhaps the dog was born in a puppy mill where the mother was exhausted and worn out from continual breeding and she and her dogs were kept in a tiny cage until the dogs were taken to a store and she was bred again to produce another litter. Perhaps the mother never developed a gentle mouth herself, so she wasn't good at teaching this skill to her puppies. For more information on how puppies learn from their mother and littermates, please see Suzanne Clothier's article ["It Takes a Pack to Raise a Puppy"](#).

Instead of just punishing the dog for doing the incorrect thing, you need to instead teach the dog how to do the correct thing – use its mouth gently. Here are some steps that can help to accomplish that if you use them correctly and consistently.

- Play fetch with your dog to direct his mouth toward appropriate toys that he is allowed to chew on to take some of the edge off his bite. Chewing is natural for dogs, so you do need to provide toys that he can chew on.
- Be sure to give him plenty of exercise daily. A tired dog is a well-behaved dog. Consult your vet for guidance on how much exercise is appropriate for your dog.
- Work with his bite inhibition while he's in a pen or on a tether so you can calmly escape his teeth. Begin petting him and playing gently. If you are comfortable with your dog gently mouthing you, as long as he's not causing pain, even if he's putting his mouth on you with some pressure, continue playing. If you want to teach your dog not to mouth at all, say "ouch!" and walk away whenever he mouths, even if it doesn't hurt.
- If he bites and hurts you, calmly say "ouch!" and walk away from him. Step outside the reach of the tether or pen so he can't follow you and continue biting to get your attention. It is important to say "ouch!" immediately after the dog bites too hard, this tells him what he did that made you leave. This method is negative punishment – his biting makes you go away.
- Wait 20-30 seconds (for a young puppy – for an older dog wait 4 to 5 minutes) to give him time to calm down, and then go back to him pick up the game again. If he's excited, barking or jumping, wait until he calms down to go back and start playing again. As long as he bites softly, continue playing. Any time he bites too hard, say "ouch!" and leave right away. If you do this consistently, he will eventually get the message that biting brings playtime to an end.
- If several repetitions don't seem to reduce hard biting, give him longer time-outs to give him more time to settle.
- Over time as he begins to show improvement, you can begin to use the same methods to encourage a more gentle mouth. When he's no longer biting hard enough to hurt, use your "Ouch" technique for moderately hard bites, then medium ones, then finally, and

- finally for any bites to skin at all. This will help the dog to realize that humans are much more sensitive to bites than other dogs are, and that they have to be very gentle.
- This method of marking the inappropriate behavior and walking away from the dog imitates, to some degree, the behavior of the mother dog and littermates when a dog bites too hard. If needle-sharp teeth clamp too hard on the mother dog's teats, she may stand up and stop nursing. Puppies learn to nurse gently to keep their mother nursing. Similarly, when dogs play together, if one is too rough his playmate will often yelp and stop playing, and the puppy learns to inhibit his bite so that he can keep playing.
 - If you must handle him when he's excited and nipping for grooming purposes or to put on his leash, offer treats with one hand to keep his mouth occupied while you work with your other hand, or have a friend distract him with treats so that you have both hands free to work with.
 - Dogs with poor bite inhibition can be very frustrating to work with. It's easy to lose patience when those needle sharp puppy teeth come down on your skin, or when an older dog who doesn't know his own strength gets overexcited and clamps down during play. Remember that this behavior is used to get a reaction, so the best thing to do is to say "ouch!" and calmly walk away and wait until the dog has calmed down to return.
 - Do a lot of play-training on the tether so you can consistently send the message that hard biting brings fun and playtime to an end and causes him to lose your attention.

This [short online training video](#) does a good job of demonstrating this technique.

It may take a while to see the positive results of your repeated hard work, but it's worth it. For more help with this issue, please email our behavior team at hthbehavior@gmail.com or call 866-657-3728 and leave a voicemail.

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